

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLIND CHILDREN
BEFORE ENTERING SCHOOL

O. H. Burritt
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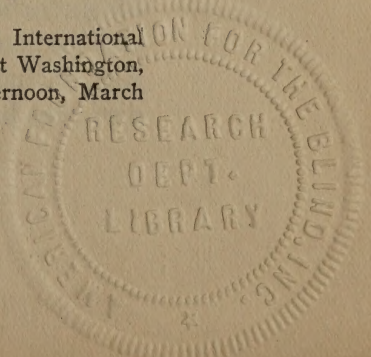
***New Opportunities for Blind Children
Before Entering School.****

Emerson once said, "America means opportunity." We who are interested in the education of the blind welcome this opportunity in America at this International Congress on the Welfare of the Child to enlist the sympathetic interest of so many representative women of the nations in the problems that press us hard for solution. For blindness is everywhere; no nation has escaped its dire results. There are in the United States to-day probably over 100,000 blind persons. Fully 13,000 of these are under twenty years of age.

The "New Opportunities for the Blind" to which your attention has thus far been directed have had to do with the prevention of preventable blindness and with the aiding of worthy and capable blind adults in their efforts, at times almost heroic, to engage in the world's work in order that they may provide for themselves and their families a respectable living. It is my purpose to show from actual records the condition of blind children when they enter school, and to suggest ways in which they may be so helped before entering school as to increase in many, many cases almost immeasurably the probabilities of efficient living.

From 1899 to 1907, Mr. Allen, for seventeen years the efficient Principal of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind at Overbrook, a suburb of Philadelphia, had had made and filed for future study the records of about 275 new pupils who entered the school during these eight years. These records were the written results of the careful observations of a very intelligent and sympathetic body of teachers, with a view to ascertaining the capabilities of blind children upon entering school. These records, let it be understood, were almost entirely independent of

*A paper read by O. H. Burritt before the First International Congress of Mothers on the Welfare of the Child, held at Washington, D. C., March 10-17, 1908. The session of Tuesday afternoon, March 17th, was devoted to the interests of the blind.



the facts given by parents or guardians in the form used in making application for the child's admission to school, and they were usually filed within one month from the date of entrance into school. Among the observations recorded are those upon the degree of blindness, previous schooling, degree of intelligence, the expression of the face, how time at home was spent, the use of the hands, condition of hearing, any evident disease or impediment, nervous symptoms, peculiarities of sitting posture or of head position, habit movements, fingers in eyes, skin habit, blushing, dreaminess, power of application, desire to learn, and ambitions for the future. It is from these records and from the application forms that I have procured the data for this paper.

Careful observation shows that blind children are about two years behind seeing children of identical age. This handicap is apparent very early in life. I have seen it stated that the blind child walks at as early an age as the child with sight, but I have never seen any data to warrant this statement. I have carefully collated the answers given by parents to the question, "At what age did the applicant first walk alone?" Of sixty-six pupils now at Overbrook, who have been totally blind from birth or early infancy, only fourteen—approximately one out of seven—walked at one year of age; twenty-nine learned to walk between one, and one and one-half years of age; and eighteen—or three out of every eleven—between one and one-half and two years of age. Two girls did not walk until two and one-half years of age; two others were three, and one boy was between five and six years old before he walked unaided. Notwithstanding the late age at which the majority of these sixty-six children walked, not more than eight are distinctly backward children; and four of these walked before they were a year and a half old. Twenty-seven out of sixty-six—approximately three out of seven—did not walk until after eighteen months old. Among nine children who did not walk until two years of age, only three are distinctly backward children, three are of average ability,

and three are among the best minds in school. The majority of seeing children walk between ten and fifteen months of age. Our data show that normal blind children *can* walk as young as seeing children—fourteen walked by the time they were a year old, twenty-nine by the time they were fifteen months of age. Why do not all blind children walk at this earlier age? What can be done to reach this result? Children learn to walk partly because of a natural instinct, partly because they imitate others and are encouraged by them in their early efforts. A little more encouragement and personal attention at the beginning need to be given to the child without sight.

A blind child can learn to wash his face and hands at as early an age as a child with sight, and it is vastly more important that he should do so. All children naturally take into their hands any object which interests them and about which they wish to know. But sight aids the seeing child. The blind child must get his most exact knowledge of most objects by handling them; hence the need for frequent washing. They will not always remove all the dirt, but how is it with our seeing boy or girl? Forty-three new pupils have been received into our kindergarten at Overbrook within the past three years. Not one of these could wash himself unaided; yet two-thirds of the number were eight years of age or older. It is *easier for you*, fond mother, to snatch the child up in your arms, carry him to the wash basin and wash him yourself. It is *infinitely better for the child* to send him to the basin to wash himself, *even if you must eventually wash him yourself*. In the first instance he is learning dependence; in the last, independence and self-reliance—the first great lesson our sightless boy or girl must learn.

Of thirty-one children totally blind from birth or early infancy, who came to Overbrook between four and eleven years of age, only ten—one-third of the entire number—could dress themselves, and two of these were only five years old, and two only six. Of the twenty-one who were unable to dress, nine were over eight, and three were over

ten years of age. Fourteen, or exactly two-thirds, of those who could not dress themselves, learned to do so within three months after entering school, four were slow in learning, but all except three have learned. Two of these three are eight years of age and have been received this year. They are very backward, if not feeble-minded, and are being carefully observed to learn whether they have sufficient mentality to be retained in school. Of forty-three pupils received at the kindergarten during the past three years, only eighteen—practically three out of seven—could dress themselves when they entered school, but ten learned within three months.

But if only one out of every three children coming to school can dress himself and none can wash himself, we should expect a much larger percentage would be capable of supplying for themselves so primitive a need as the demand for food when it is placed upon the table before them. Yet of the forty-three new pupils received at the kindergarten during the past three years only twenty—less than one-half of the entire number—were able to feed themselves. These twenty ate fairly well with a spoon. A little girl, eight years of age, our kindergartner reported soon after she came, "has not enough interest in eating to take a bite without prompting; chews very poorly; can scarcely feed herself with a spoon." A lad six years of age came to our kindergarten April 24, 1899. The first day "he cried and tried to get away when placed at the dinner table. At first he refused to eat from a spoon, would lick gravy from finger." Two days later this record was made: "Does not like to sit at table to eat—wants to have a piece of dry bread and walk around while eating it. When placed at table, he screams, cries, kicks, and pounds when he is served. Does the same thing when he wants more or when the food does not suit him." May 15th, three weeks after he came, we read: "This morning for the first time he tried to feed himself. After he had had two plates of oatmeal, he was given a little more, and Miss H. put the spoon in his hand and had Ella (the maid) tell him he must learn

how to feed himself. At first he cried and said he couldn't and wouldn't. Ella told him if he wanted it he must feed himself. Then he tried and did very well. The same thing happened this noon." Joseph is now fifteen years of age, has been in school nine years, and during this time has completed kindergarten and six of our eight grades. But Joseph can never be an efficient man. If he could have been taught during his early years the things he ought to have learned during this plastic period, his efficiency would have been at least doubled. As it is he will always be to a greater or less degree a dependent upon the charity of relatives or interested friends, or an inmate of an almshouse.

But the ability to wash, dress, and feed himself is, after all, a question of having good use of the hands. Of sixty-six pupils totally blind from infancy now in school at Overbrook, only thirty-six—or six out of eleven—are recorded as having good use of their hands when they entered school, twenty-two as having only fair use, and eight poor. Of ninety pupils totally blind from birth, only forty-three, or less than one-half, were noted as having good use of their hands, twenty-seven fair use, and twenty poor. In other words, more than one-half of these pupils did not have good use of their hands. It has been an interesting study to seek to learn why some totally blind pupils have such excellent use of their hands, while others are so awkward and clumsy. Among thirty-six girls totally blind from birth, who came to school between four and fifteen years of age, twenty-four, or two-thirds, had good use of their hands. An examination of their application blanks shows that these girls were occupied at home before entering school in some one or more of the following ways: "Spent much time in playing with other children or with dolls; helping mother about the house by washing and drying dishes, making beds, dusting, shelling peas, etc." Marion, seven years of age, "helps mother about the house in a playful way; has a small ironing board which she uses when her mother irons." Not one of the nine girls who

had only fair use of her hands' is reported as in any way aiding about the house; four were, however, said to be "generally active." Among thirty boys totally blind from birth, entering school between the ages of four and one-half and eleven, only thirteen had good use of their hands, twelve fair, and five poor. Those who had good use of their hands were "generally useful about home, playing with brothers and sisters, or with other children, playing with toys or with pets." "Rocking in a chair" and "playing alone" were the occupations of the five boys who had poor use of their hands.

The close parallelism between good use of the hands and natural incentives to free play is noticeable and significant. Among thirty-six pupils blind from infancy who had good use of their hands, about two-thirds had brothers and sisters of near age, one-third had not; but of these it is definitely stated, in the forms of application, that they were constantly busy playing, either with other children or with toys or dolls; or they were fortunate in having mothers who taught them to do many simple but helpful things in the home.

The relation between the use of the hands and the degree of intelligence is noteworthy. Among forty-eight boys who had good use of their hands, forty-five—fifteen out of sixteen—are noted as possessed of average intelligence, and only three as backward; of twenty-three having fair use of their hands, twenty-one were of average intelligence, and two were notably backward; but of nine who had poor use of their hands, eight were distinctly backward, and only one was recorded as possessed of average intelligence. Among sixty-six girls who were observed as having good use of their hands, fifty-eight, or nearly ten out of eleven, were noted as possessing average intelligence, and only eight as backward; but of eighteen having fair use of their hands, only eight had average intelligence, and ten were backward; and the four noted as having poor use of the hands are four of our most backward girls. Of a total of thirteen pupils who, upon entering school, had poor use of

their hands, only one was thought to possess average intelligence, while twelve were recorded as backward. As these 168 pupils considered are still in school I have had opportunities to observe them, to confer with their teachers, and to study them with some care. These observations show that every one of these eight boys who, when they came to school, had poor use of their hands, is in the class of our most backward and least promising pupils. The conclusion seems to be that all our pupils who give reasonable promise of efficient living after leaving school are of the number who use their hands well, and that, without a single exception, those who have poor use of their hands will be absolutely dependent all their lives long. Now, facility in the use of the hands can be developed only in childhood, while there is the greatest plasticity of the material we seek to mould. It cannot be developed in young men and young women. How important that every parent should know this, and how essential that the parent of every blind child should know it, that he may do all within his power to make possible a successful career in the face of a fearful handicap!

No one can work long among blind children without a realization of how general among them are several unfortunate mannerisms which, by reason of being peculiar to them, are often spoken of as "blindisms." I refer to such habits as putting the fingers in the eyes, shaking the hands before the face, biting the fingers or finger nails, standing in one place and whirling about, rotating the head in a semi-circle from right to left, rocking the body backward and forward while sitting—a habit acquired through weeks, months, or even years of patronizing mother's rocking chair. So perfectly do some blind children acquire this habit that they will sit literally by the hour on an ordinary chair, a piano stool, a bench, or the door-step and enjoy the pleasurable excitement of rocking without a rocker. But we must not blame the child for these unfortunate, even repulsive habits. It is nature's call for the utilization of stored up energy. Our duty as parents and as teachers of

blind children is to study earnestly to supply suitable ways for the expression of the natural desire to use this potential energy.

Of the 196 pupils entering our school during the past eight years, seventy-nine, or nearly two-fifths, had at entrance the habit of putting the fingers in their eyes; sixty-four did not have it, and in reference to the remaining fifty-three we have no data. This habit is much more common among those totally blind from infancy. Among ninety such pupils, fifty-three, or more than five out of nine, had the habit; only twenty-one are noted as not having it, and there is no definite information concerning sixteen cases. Pupils who have partial sight do not usually have this habit, and it is extremely rare to find it among those who have lost their sight after five or six years of age.

Among 246 new pupils entering school between four and twenty-one years of age, seventy-nine, or one-third, had such habit movements as rolling the head from side to side, rocking and bending the body, or shaking hands or objects before the eyes; ninety-seven had no such habits, and we are without information concerning the remaining seventy; but of eighty-eight pupils who were totally blind from infancy, exactly one-half had one or more of these unfortunate habits.

Of 246 new pupils who have come to Overbrook during the past eight years, 162, or two-thirds of the whole number, had some of the several "blindisms" referred to above; only eighty-four were entirely free from them; but of ninety pupils blind from infancy, only sixteen, or about one-sixth of the entire number, are totally without some form of these mannerisms; the remaining seventy-four, or five-sixths of the entire number, have one or more of them sufficiently noticeable to be a matter of record.

At what age should the blind child enter school? As in the case of children with sight, this is a matter to be determined concerning each individual child. If our blind child is blessed with a father and mother who have the time, patience, and wisdom to see that he romps, runs

errands about the house, yard, and barn; dries dishes, turns the wringer for mother or sister when the washing is being done, helps make the beds—in short, will study to find the greatest variety of ways possible for him to utilize for his future advantage that energy that otherwise will express itself in shaking the hands before the face, biting the fingers or the finger nails, swaying the body to and fro, or rocking vehemently in the rocking chair—then he may well remain at home until eight, nine, or even ten years of age. Blindness is found to be most prevalent among the poor where father, mother, and every member of the family must contribute to the support of the household. It usually happens that there are several children in the family, and the natural instinct to play is sufficiently strong to draw our blind child out of himself and engage him in various games with the other children. If these are the home conditions, our sightless boy or girl is better off than the child of over-indulgent parents who may be in more comfortable circumstances. Fortunate indeed the blind child whose parents are too much occupied with the daily round to interfere with nature's strongest instinct—the instinct to play! There is great diversity among our American schools for the blind as to the age at which pupils are admitted, but the minimum age has been steadily lowered until fifteen schools announce that they admit children under eight years of age, and seven others have no age limits. On the other hand, six schools will not receive children under eight, two under nine, one under ten, and one demands that they must be twelve years of age before its doors will swing open to admit them. We at Overbrook have no age limits for admission; but of the forty-three new pupils received into our kindergarten within the past three years, only one-third was under eight years of age. Our schools have been gradually forced to admit children at a younger age because the efficiency of so many has been negated by a failure on the part of parents and guardians to know what is best for them and to do wisely by them. We have learned by experience that the way a

child, blind from early childhood, occupies his time until he is twelve years of age, almost invariably and inevitably determines whether he will be an independent, self-reliant, and efficient member of society, or a pensioner upon the charity of his family or friends or, if without these, an inmate of an almshouse. As educators of the young blind, we feel that some plan ought to be devised to disseminate more widely among the parents of sightless boys and girls the information that has been culled from years of experience in the teaching of blind children. Many parents do not know the possibilities for their blind child. When this information is brought to them, they welcome it, and in most cases proceed at once to act upon it.

The condition of blind children upon entering school being as I have described, what can be done to overcome this initial handicap? A few simple suggestions—well known to those who know the blind, but not so familiar to the mother of the little blind child—are made with the hope that they may be found helpful to some who are earnestly seeking to train a sightless child for a happy, useful, and independent life:

1. Remember that in all human probability your blind child will outlive you, and that much that you do for him out of a heart overflowing with love and sympathy will not be done for him by anyone except a loving parent. Do you not then see how great a kindness you are doing him by teaching him to do as many things as possible for himself?

2. See to it that he learns to walk as early as a seeing child of equal age and strength. Do not forget that he lacks some of the incentives that the child with sight possesses. *He sees* a ball or a top, a book or a doll on the floor, and forthwith he starts to get it. By frequent observation he has learned that his older brother or sister, father or mother, reach what they wish most quickly by walking to it. Thus instinct and imitation combine to aid the seeing child in learning to walk. But your blind boy may not know that these playthings are on the floor. Take pains to have him

know it, and then encourage him to go after them, nature's way first, by creeping to them: later, give him your hand to aid him, but gradually withdraw this help until some unexpected day he will reward your patient efforts to make him thus early as near as possible like your seeing child.

3. Encourage him in every possible way to play. Give him simple things, but as great a variety as possible. He should have a rubber ball, a set of blocks large enough for him to pile up and then knock over; a set of dominoes with the spots sunken is admirable, and a little later, if you encourage him in it, he will learn to count by means of them; still later to play as good a game of dominoes as you with your two good eyes. Provide him with a sand-pile, a swing, a see-saw, a coasting trolley—an inexpensive one can be made with a rope and an ordinary pulley.

4. Have him learn to wash his hands and face—he will think this great fun; he will get his dress or his waist wet and afterwards it will be more easily soiled: never mind, boys and girls are of more consequence than clothing.

5. Teach your blind boy or girl to dress himself as early as you can. Again and again our field officer, Mr. Delfino, finds a blind child anywhere between six and twelve years of age who is unable to dress himself. Though himself blind and having but one arm, he gets hold of such a boy, has him take off his waist and see if he cannot put it on alone; he can't do so at first; the necessary assistance is given, off comes the waist again, again the process is repeated. Next, is learning how to button the waist. If the mother is skeptical—and in the case of a young blind child she almost always is, particularly if she hasn't taught him to do these things for himself—the blind "field officer" unties his own shoestring, and without sight and with only his left hand, he ties a double bow-knot; or his necktie, and ties that whether it be a "bow" or a "four-in-hand." The "field officer" does not feel it necessarily incumbent upon him to teach the child how to do it, but he does feel it his duty to make the parents feel it *their duty to teach* and *their blind child's right to know* how to do all these necessary things for himself.

6. Don't forget that the normal blind child, *if taught early enough*, can learn to eat as well as a child with sight and you have no right to make more conspicuous your sightless child, by failure to teach him to do so.

Now what can be done to teach these blind children and their parents earlier and thus make more possible, even probable, a successful life even against such great odds?

First: Multiply "field officers," "home teachers," associations like the New York Association for the Blind, societies like the Scotoic Aid Society of St. Louis and permanent commissions for the blind as in Massachusetts. Our "field officer" has visited over 4,200 blind people in Pennsylvania and 250 in Delaware: these since June, 1903, working only between five and six months of the year. As one result of his work the number of annual admissions to our school has been doubled; an average of seventeen new pupils each year for the past five years, who would otherwise not have entered school, have come to Overbrook. Statistics show that "field officer" work is far more effective in bringing children to school than a compulsory education law ever has been or, in my judgment, can be.

Then: Multiply kindergartens and get children to them at a younger age, if they have unsuitable homes. Otherwise we are treasuring up failure against the day of failure.

Some one has said: "Education makes the world a man's field; the want of it, a field a man's world." Nowhere among men is this truer than among the blind boys and girls of every nation.

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